



Tugboat Captain Sentenced for Hitting Bligh reef and discharging oil

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 15, 2012

Anchorage, Alaska – Acting U.S. Attorney Kevin Feldis announced today that Ronald Monsen of Anchorage was sentenced in federal court in Anchorage to 36 months of probation with the first six months to be spent on home confinement, plus a \$15,000 fine, and 50 hours of community service. Monsen's sentence was the result of his guilty plea and conviction for violating the federal Clean Water Act.

On June 15, 2012, Ronald Monsen, 63, of Anchorage was sentenced by United States Magistrate Judge Deborah M. Smith.

According to Mr. Feldis, the following facts provided the basis for Monsen's guilty plea:

Ronald Monsen was a Captain in command of the Pathfinder Tug operated by Crowley Maritime Corporation. On December 23, 2009, the Pathfinder was conducting ice scouting operations in the area of Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska with Monsen in command of the tug. After scouting for ice, Captain Monsen kept the Pathfinder in Prince William Sound until it was time to communicate his ice report at 6:00 pm, expecting that he would then be released from scout duty and be allowed to return to Valdez harbor. While waiting until 6:00 pm, Monsen altered the auto-pilot course back to Valdez by manually by-passing or skipping two way points on the pre-programmed Global Positioning System ("GPS") course that would safely guide the Pathfinder's travel out of Prince William Sound and back to Valdez harbor. By skipping these two way points, Monsen set a course that, once it was engaged, would steer the Pathfinder directly to Rocky Point way point. After Monsen by-passed these two way points, but before it was time to engage this course and return to Valdez, the Pathfinder continued to travel slowly to the southeast, putting the vessel due South of Bligh Reef. As the vessel traveled, Bligh Reef was soon directly in the path between the Pathfinder and the Rocky Point way point.

At 6:00 pm, the Second Mate called in the ice report and the tug was released from ice duty. Monsen then reached over the Second Mate, placed both engines full speed ahead, and engaged the auto-pilot to steer the vessel directly to the Rocky Point way point. Monsen did not chart his position, or attempt to determine his exact location via GPS or any other method. As a result, when Monsen engaged this course, he did not know the location of the Pathfinder, was unaware that the vessel was 1.5 miles due south of Bligh Reef, and did not recognize that he had just set a course that was taking the Pathfinder directly into the reef.

After making the course change, Monsen instructed the Second Mate to make an entry in the logbook, while Monsen moved away from the vessel controls and walked to the bridge computer that was located on a separate workspace, facing away from the controls of the vessel. As the vessel headed directly toward the reef, Monsen checked his e-mail and schedules and played computer games. He did not check the vessel's location or the location of the reef in relation to his course. The vessel was left on autopilot and no one was at the controls.

Had Monsen not deleted the two way points earlier in the evening, the Pathfinder would have steered northwest, back to these points, and clear of Bligh Reef. Instead – while Monsen played games on the bridge's computer – the Pathfinder headed due north and ran aground on Bligh Reef at approximately 6:14 pm on December 23, 2009. As a result of the grounding, the Pathfinder's keel and tanks were breached, and the vessel discharged approximately 6,410 gallons of fuel, causing a visible sheen on the water of Prince William Sound.

Judge Smith commented that the defendant's conduct was grossly negligent and that it was important to send a strong message to deter such negligent conduct. In determining an appropriate sentence, Judge Smith also took into account that as a result of his conduct Monsen no longer had a pilots license and was no longer employed as a captain.

Mr. Feldis commended the United States Coast Guard Criminal Investigative Service and the Environmental Protection Agency Criminal Investigative Division for the investigation that led to the successful prosecution of Monsen.